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English Language Acquisition in Indonesian University Students: The Effect of Learning Styles

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Abstract. The study aims to ascertain whether various forms of learning impact tertiary students' ability to learn the English language. The VARK questionnaire has been chosen as the model for this research (VARK stands for Visual, Aural, Read/Write, and Kinesthetic sensory models used for information acquisition). 100 first-year university students were selected as the respondent in this study. They were required to complete the VARK questionnaire at the start of the study, and the data were analyzed using SPSS. Furthermore, to determine whether the various learning styles correlate with the student's grades throughout the entire course session, the study examined the final results of the students' English examination results. According to the data, students who preferred reading and writing learning styles performed better than those who chose the other. In conclusion, the data gathered are helpful for tertiary educators in the future.

Keywords: *English, Acquisition, and Learning Style*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of Study

English is a language dominantly used in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Australia, Ireland, New Zealand, and the different island nations in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The English language is also used as an official language in India, the Philippines, including South Africa. The English language is the go-to language as a foreign language in most other countries globally, and this has established itself as the global lingua franca. (Crystal, 2020) English language users in the world are estimated to number around two billion persons at this current time. With a language with such a prestigious status, learners and educators must understand and learn how to master the language effectively.

When it comes to language learning, it is an active process that begins at birth and continues in life. People learn a language because they need it to communicate their thoughts, feelings, and experience, communicate and forge relationships with family members and friends, or make sense of how the world works. The English language study requires these four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Sanjaya, Mokhtar and Sumarsih, 2015).

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In the context within the Universitas Negeri Medan (UNIMED) - Indonesia, the correlation between learning styles and language acquisition plays a part in the students' success in their English competency. One major issue when it comes to the acquisition of the English Language for students of UNIMED is the fact that English is not the student's first language, and therefore this researcher believes that this will be one of the impeding factors, which will cause students to have difficulties in mastering the English language.

The objective of this study was to find out whether there is an effect of between the learning styles on the achievement of the students of UNIMED in their mastery of the English language. The study will also answer these few research questions:

1) What is the predominant learning style among the students of UNIMED?
2) Which learning style achieved the highest score in English amongst the students of UNIMED?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Second Language Acquisition

Second language acquisition, otherwise known as SLA, focuses on the study of English achievement of the diploma students of UNIMED. According to Hulstjin (2005) Explicit learning is input processing with the conscious intention to find out whether the input information contains regularities and, if so, to work out the concepts and rules with which these regularities can be captured.

With this statement alone, we can understand that the learning and acquisition of the English language among the students of UNIMED is not something that they are instilled with but requires active participation and is an ongoing process.

In the acquisition of a second language, in this case, being English. There have been many hypotheses that have been provided by Krashen (1992), one of the hypotheses that this researcher will like to bring to the attention is the **Acquisition-Learning** hypothesis. This hypothesis is one of the fundamental hypotheses that Krashen provides in his theory of second language acquisition. In this hypothesis, there is a distinction shown between acquiring a language and learning about a language. The '**acquisition**' system refers more towards a process where like children learning their first language, the process is subconscious and requires the person to have meaningful conversations within the target language. The focus is communicating instead of looking at the rules of the language.

In '**learning**,' the language is taught in the form of guided instructions, and it requires the students to consciously process information and have a thorough knowledge of the language they are learning in order to master the language fully, for example, the understanding of the grammatical rules of the language.

In learning about a new language or a new subject, one needs to understand the preferred learning style. Learning styles is a term used to refer to how a learner gathers, processes interprets, organizes, and thinks about the information. Students have different learning styles, which is the reason for the diversity seen in classrooms regarding how students acquire information. (Khanal et al., 2014). When speaking about learning styles, it is not in itself ability but rather a preferred way of using one's abilities (Sheu et al., 2013). According to O'Malley et al. (1985), learning styles can be taught. There have different terms that have been adopted into literature, such as learning style, sensory preference, types of personality, and cognitive style. Some of these terms, in some instances, have been used interchangeably, while in other occasions, they are differentiated (Cassidy, 2004). This paper focuses on the sensory learning styles, including visual, tactile/kinesthetic, and auditory— (Dornyei,2005; Oxford,2003), which will be explained in the following section.

2.2 The VARK inventory

The VARK inventory is derived from a study carried out by Fleming and Mills (1992), which stated four modalities of student learning. The different learning styles were identified after the researchers spend thousands of hours in-classroom observation. VARK (an acronym for Visual, Aural, Read/Write, and Kinesthetic, different learning styles) is a learning inventory categorized into the 'instructional preference' modal. (Marcy, 2001) As covered in the section above, the visual learners, the aural learners, and the kinesthetic learners. Added into this group of learners are the (R) learners who benefit the most from the written word. They like to read the text and take notes verbatim and reread these over and over again. (Khanal et al., 2014). The development of the VARK inventory was an effort to improve faculty development and help with the betterment of student learning. Research has shown that students' learning styles and approaches to study may significantly bear on their academic success. (Newble & Gordon, 1985). Figure 1 further illustrates the VARK learning styles and the subcategories associated with each different learning style.

This paper seeks to determine the correlation between the students' learning styles and their understanding of the English language using the VARK inventory. It is with the hope that by understanding which learning styles suit the student best, the educators will be able to cater to the needs of the students and help with the betterment of their English language capabilities.

2.2.1. Visual versus verbal

In visual learners, the individual prefers to think in pictures and obtain information through visual means such as presentation slides, diagrams, and videos. Visual learners have a keen eye and are taking it all in. (Weichel, 2018). On the other spectrum, verbal learners tend to understand through verbal explanation, which can either be spoken or written.

2.2.2. Auditory learners

This form of learning style is focused on the learner's sense of hearing. In short, the learner can remember or understand a concept through auditory representation. The auditory learner is typically a good listener who can pick things up when they hear them and benefits from hearing lectures, podcasts, brainstorming, and participating in discussions (Weichel, 2018)

2.2.3. Kinesthetic learners

The kinesthetic learning style is another specific learning style. A kinesthetic can process information more effectively by doing instead of listening or reading. The characteristics of kinesthetic learners are that they need a multi-sensory learning environment for deep learning as they learn through 'doing' (Macmillan, 2018). A study done on Malaysian university students by Muniandy (2013) found out that Malay students prefer kinesthetic learning style while Chinese students prefer auditory learning styles

To date, there have been numerous researches that have been carried out with relations to the learning styles of students and how it is connected to their academic achievements. The research that was carried seeks to find some of the more preferred learning styles of a group and how it can help educators pinpoint and decide curriculums much more suited to their learners.

In one research carried out by Widharyanto and Binawan (2020), several 175 participants from different ethnic groups such as the Java, Papua, Flores, Dayak, and Batak were given a VARK questionnaire Fleming and a language learning strategy questionnaire from Oxford. The results of the two questionnaires were analyzed to determine the type of

learning style and language learning strategy. The first finding suggests that the main learning styles of students from the five ethnicities are variants [aural] and [kinesthetic], including variations in bimodal and trimodal. The second finding shows that the major language learning strategy is metacognitive and affective. The third finding reveals some similarities and unique differences in their learning style and learning strategies. (Widharyanto & Binawan, 2020, p. 486)

In another research by Moayyeri (2015, p. 132), the goal was to determine the impact of the undergraduate students learning preference via the VARK model on their language achievement. A total of 360 students from different science studies (life, humanities, basic science, engineering) were selected from The State University, Islamic Azad University, Farhangiyan University, Payamenoor University, and Medical University of Sistan and Baluchestan province in Iran. Once the students were selected, the students were given a standard proficiency test and the VARK questionnaire. Upon analyzing the test scores, the reading style was the dominant style of learning among Iranian EFL learners, and there is a strong correlation between the students' field of study and their learning styles. Also, students with reading styles have the highest language achievement, and the students with visual personality type have the lowest performance. (Moayyeri, 2015)

Another related research regarding the VARK modal and the English language learning was carried out by (Hadriana et al., 2019, p. 340) in Universitas Riau, Indonesia. The researchers wanted to determine if there is a connection between learning styles and the student's achievement of the English language. Three hundred students were involved in this research, and the results were collected based on the VARK questionnaire and the students' English grades. Based on the findings, the researchers concluded that there is a close relationship between the students' learning styles and their English language competency.

As shown in the research above, there is a strong connection between the language achievements of the learners with their learning styles. In the first research by Widharyanto & Binawan (2020), it can be seen that learners benefit more from the aural and kinesthetic learning styles. In the research carried out by Moayyeri (2015), we can see that the reading style of learning has a dominant place in the students' learning of a new language.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Participants

Non-probabilities sampling approach is used in this research. Based on the figure below, the sampling framework consists of the theoretical population, the study population, the sampling frame, and the sample.

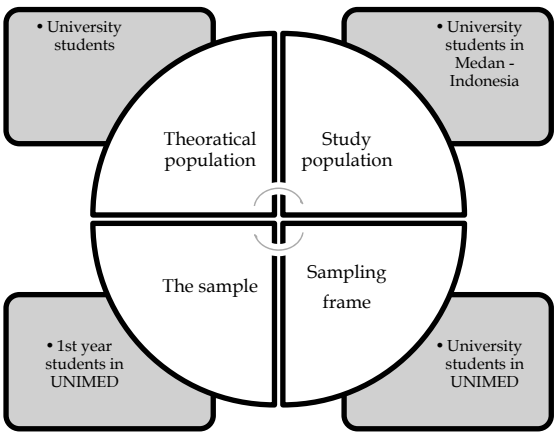


Figure 2. Sampling Framework

Therefore, based on the sampling framework, 100 1st year students from different faculties within the Universitas Negeri medan – Indonesia were asked to participate. The ages of all the participants involved were 18 to 20. Golafshani (Golafshani, 2003) stated that the validity for quantitative study requires statistical generalization to explore more situations and broader groups. The researcher understands that this sample might not widely generalize findings and not represent all situations; however, this study can be considered a pilot study from more extensive and experimental studies.

3.2. Instruments

The study being carried is made to be exploratory research, and the main aim is to understand the students' preferred learning styles and how the different learning styles affect academic performances. To look into the effects of learning styles of the university students in UNIMED, the use of survey strategies was effective. (Vermunt, 2005).

This quantitative data was collected using the translated VARK questionnaire. The VARK questionnaire is a set of questions that consists of 16 questions based on different situations where there are four options to choose from. Each of the options is catered towards one of the four learning styles. The average time it took for each participant to answer the question was 15 minutes.

The other data collected for the research is the diploma students' final exam results for the English subject, a mandatory subject to take for 1st-semester students. The final exam paper consists of multiple-choice questions, grammar questions, and comprehension questions, where the students have 2 hours to complete the exam.

3.3. Data Collection Procedures

Step 1: The researcher comes up with the VARK questionnaire and looks into the translated version of the questionnaire for the students.

Step 2: The researcher then converts the VARK questionnaire into the Google form format to be sent to the 1st-semester students within UNIMED.

Step 3: The researcher liaises with the lecturer teaching the English subject to collect the students' final examination results.

Step 4: The researcher collects both the results from the VARK questionnaire and the final exam results and tabulates them.

3.4. Technique of Analyzing the data

Once the data have been collected, the first form of data analyzed is the response from the VARK questionnaire in Google Form. Using the breakdown algorithm within the Google Form, the researcher found out the learning style of the students. The technique used to analyze the data is first and foremost by identifying the preferred learning styles of the students while acquiring the English language. After the initial findings of what are the students' preferred choice of learning styles has been determined. The research will then look at the scores of each learning style to find out how the different learning styles affect the students' overall grades in their acquisition of the English language. This analysis has been done using the data of the students' English Finals paper.

4. Results & Discussion

4.1. Students' Learning Styles

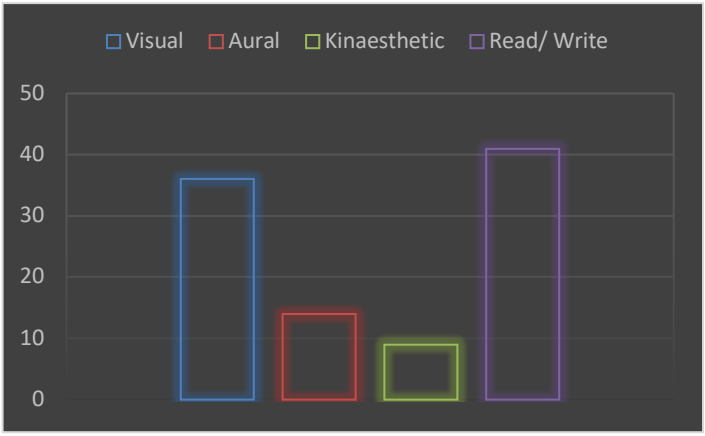


Figure 3. Learning Styles

The collected data above answers the first question: the preferred learning styles among the students; the data were taken from the Google Form questionnaire based on the VARK module. As is shown in the figure above, it can be seen that the read/write learning style (41%) and the visual learning style (36%) seems to be the first and second choice of learning style, where else the third choice of learning style among the respondents was aural (14%), while the kinesthetic learning style was the least preferred styles of the respondents at (9%).

The next step in the research was to find out what effects the different learning styles have on the student's achievement in the English language; with that in mind, the other data collected and analyzed were the respondent's English results from their first semester.

In this analysis of the data, we will be looking at how the students from the four learning styles fare in their final examination papers; this data is collected by matching the students of the four learning styles: visual, aural, read/write, and kinesthetic with final paper results. With the comparison of the data, we will determine which of the learning styles proves to be more effective in the acquisition of the English language.

From the 100 respondents of the VARK questionnaire, 41 students identified themselves as read/ write learners. The 41 students' English results were compiled, and the scores are presented in the table and figures below:

Table 1. *Read/Write Learners' Scores*

MARKS	Number of Students	Percentage
0-39	0	0%
40-49	0	0%
50-59	3	7.3%
60-69	9	22%
70-79	15	36.6%
80-89	13	31.7%
90-100	1	2.4%

From the 100 respondents of the VARK questionnaire, 36 students identified themselves as visual learners. The 36 students' English results were compiled, and the scores are presented in the table and figures below:

Table 2. **Visual Learners' Scores**

Marks	Number of Students	Percentage
0-39	0	0%
40-49	0	0%
50-59	7	19.5%
60-69	9	25%
70-79	17	47.2%
80-89	3	8.3%
90-100	0	0%

From the 100 respondents of the VARK questionnaire, 14 students identified themselves as aural learners. The 14 students' English results were compiled, and the scores are presented in the table and figures below:

Table 3. **Aural Learners' Scores**

Marks	Number of Students	Percentage
0-39	0	0%
40-49	0	0%
50-59	7	50%
60-69	5	35.7%
70-79	2	14.3%
80-89	0	0%
90-100	0	0%

From the 100 respondents of the VARK questionnaire, 9 students identified themselves as kinesthetic learners. The 9 students' English results were compiled, and the scores are presented in the table and figures below:

Table 4. **Kinesthetic Learners' Scores**

Marks	Number of Students	Percentage
0-39	0	0%
40-49	2	22.2%
50-59	3	33.3%
60-69	1	11.1%
70-79	2	22.2%
80-89	1	11.1%
90-100	0	0%

From the analysis of the students' scores from each learning styles, we then moved on to analyzing the average scores of the students for each of the different learning styles and compared the learning styles against each other to determine which was the learning style had the highest average scores and which learning styles produced the lowest average scores.

Table 5. *Average English score of different learning styles*

Subject	Total Students	Learning Style	No. of participants	Mean (Average Score)
English	100	Read/Write	41	74.75
		Visual	36	69.44
		Aural	14	61.43
		Kinesthetic	9	61.66

As can be seen from Table 5, the learners who preferred the Read/Write learning style achieved a higher score (74.75). The second group that had an average score of (69.44) was visual learners. On the other hand, both aural and kinesthetic style learners' scores similar; their average scores were at 61.43 and 61.66 respectively.

5. Conclusion

This research was conducted to explore the learning preferences of different students and how the different learning styles affect the students' mastery of the English language. Based on the findings that have been presented, it shows that that the Read/Write learning style is the predominant learning style among students studying in UNIMED. The second preferred learning style was the visual learning style. Aural and Kinesthetic learning styles placed third and fourth, respectively.

In the data collected, which measures students' achievement of English based on their learning styles, it can be seen that Read/ Write learners achieved a high average score. The kinesthetic learners were the group that achieves the lowest of the average scores in English in terms of learning styles.

As shown in the data and analysis, the learners who prefer the Read/ Write learning style were more proficient and tend to score in the higher percentile.

Future researches need to encompass a much larger sample size to gain more reliable answers and findings. Furthermore, the research will need to include more universities within the vicinity of Kuantan for it to be more accurate. Another aspect to consider for the research would be to consider that learners might have particular learning style preferences, and the questionnaire should be modified to cater to students with multiple learning style preferences. These are some of the issues that should be considered for future researches on learning styles.

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